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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# When migrants become hosts and nonmigrants become mobile: Bangladeshis visiting their friends and relatives in London

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## Abstract

Most studies of migrants visiting their friends and relatives (VFR) are on homeland visits. In this article, we reverse the transnational optic and study nonmigrants from the country of origin visiting their migrated friends and relatives abroad. We draw on participant observation and 57 interviews with migrant hosts and nonmigrant visitors carried out in London and in the Sylhet region of Bangladesh. Visits from the homeland to the diaspora are found to be deeply meaningful for the maintenance of transnational familyhood, especially at critical moments such as weddings, childbirth, and end of life. They are performative acts of belonging with unwritten rules of mutual obligations and choreographed itineraries to the houses of relatives and friends and to tourist sites. They also represent inequalities in economic status and social mobility between the migrants and their left-behind relatives and friends in Bangladesh. Most visits are enjoyable for all concerned, but subtle tensions can arise, for instance, in the hosts' difficulty in managing their ongoing working lives with duties of hospitality and acting as guides and in visitors' intense schedule of duty visits to many relatives and lack of agency in stepping out of the Bangladeshi community in London. Furthermore, in an increasingly hostile environment for getting visas to visit the United Kingdom, an unequal and inhumane situation arises of blocked mobility.

## KEYWORDS

Bangladeshi migrants, involuntary immobility, London, Sylhet, transnational familyhood, visiting friends and relatives

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

There has been a recent upsurge of interest in the phenomenon of "visiting friends and relatives" (VFR). Initially, most of this attention came from tourism studies, reflecting a concern to quantify the scale and economic dimensions of this form of "hidden" leisure and holiday pursuit, which largely went unrecorded because overnight stays were

not in hotels or other registered accommodation (Jackson, 1990). Subsequently, VFR has attracted the attention of scholars of migration and mobility, who recognise that this phenomenon "constitutes a major component of mobility and migrations, with substantial economic, cultural and networking implications" (Janta, Cohen, & Williams, 2015, p. 585). Following Williams, Chaban, and Holland (2011), we see VFR as a space-time practice "enfolded" within

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the longer-term temporal structures of labour migration and diaspora formation, such as the generations-old Bangladeshi migration to Britain, the subject of this study.

Most studies of VFR within a migration or diaspora context look at visits to the country of origin. In this paper, we reverse the transnational optic and explore the complex interrelations between migrant as host and the nonmigrant visitors. What do such visits “mean” for both the visitors and the visited? How are the visits planned and “performed”? And what are the underlying conditions of power and inequality that constrain the ability of nonmigrants to undertake these journeys? By setting our paper within the British-Bangladeshi transnational social field, we spotlight an established diaspora originating in the colonial era but continually refreshed by subsequent waves of migration over the decades since the Second World War. Our research participants are first- and second-generation Bangladeshis originating from the region of Sylhet and their older-generation parents who are visiting or have visited in the past.

Long-distance migration creates separated families and leads to a complex array of transnational mobilities, obligations, and tensions that are reactions to the spatial decoupling of kinship, locality, and culture. “Doing family” becomes a transnational experience and visits are a fundamental component of this transnational familyhood (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002) and circulation of care (Baldassar & Merla, 2013). The visits are anticipated, planned, experienced, and then reflected upon. They are doubly embedded: within the micro-spatialities of the diaspora experience and within the life course of the individuals concerned. Such visits are performative encounters of kinship and belonging (Fortier, 2000, pp. 3–6), often with more-or-less predefined choreographies. Complex gender and generational relationships are played out within a shifting host-guest dynamic defined by expectations of behaviour surrounding hospitality and gift-giving, which can be a combination of traditional customs and new ones introduced by the context of migration and diasporic life (Mauss, 1990). Above all, it needs to be recognised that the terrain of VFR is not a level playing field but circumscribed by economic and geopolitical inequalities (Collyer & King, 2015). International mobility is generally easy for those who are wealthy, come from an “advanced” country, and are able to travel visa-free. It is much more difficult for those coming from poor countries in the Global South—as our findings will show.

## 2 | VFR REVERSED

Within the context of migration, VFR takes place primarily in two directions and by two sets of actors. By far the most common are visits to the homeland by migrants and their descendants. There is a fast-growing literature on this type of VFR, briefly acknowledged below. The second type is when nonmigrants from the homeland visit their relatives and friends abroad. These “other-way” visits have been much less often researched.<sup>1</sup> Existing scholarship on the British-Bangladeshi migratory experience, led by Gardner (1995, 2002) and Zeitlyn (2015), has never explored this aspect

of transnational life, even though British Bangladeshis are regarded as “a transnational community par excellence” (Gardner & Mand, 2012, p. 971). This is where our paper breaks new ground.<sup>2</sup>

Any review of migrants' VFR should pay tribute to Baldassar's (2001) pioneering *Visits Home*, a detailed ethnography of Veneto-origin Italians in Australia and their visits to San Fior, one of their main “home” villages in the Alps. Such visits are characterised as a “secular pilgrimage” (p.323), and the main themes that motivate them (see also Baldassar, Baldock, & Wilding, 2007, pp. 131–171) include nostalgia/homesickness; key life events such as weddings and funerals; the ongoing need for physical and emotional contact; fulfilling duties relating to intergenerational care; the desire to demonstrate the success of the migration project; and to keep in touch in order to prepare for future return migration. Baldassar's work sets the template for other research on homeland visits, which ranges widely across multiple global contexts, including Europe, the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia (see, inter alia, Asiedu, 2005; Conway, Potter, & St. Bernard, 2009; Duval, 2004; Mueller, 2015; Oepfen, 2013; Sagmo, 2015; Stephenson, 2002). Existing research on the Bangladeshi case of homeland visits often reveals a cross-generational perspective (Gardner & Mand, 2012; Miah & King, 2018; Nilsson DeHanas, 2013; Zeitlyn, 2012). For the first generation, the trips are primarily about revisiting the places and people of their early lives in rural Sylhet: both are very distant in time and place from their current lives as *Londoni*, residents of London (Miah & King, 2018). For second-generation British-Bangladeshi adults, homeland or “roots” visits generate ambiguous feelings: on the one hand, they enjoy being “treated like a king” but, on the other, they are disturbed by the poverty and backwardness (Nilsson DeHanas, 2013). Likewise, Zeitlyn's (2012) research on British-born Bangladeshi-heritage children, taken on homeland visits by their parents, reveals mixed reactions: on the whole, the children are happy to meet their extended family members in Bangladesh, especially their similar-age cousins; they appreciate the local culture, family warmth and hospitality, and trips to see local sights. But they are also challenged by the squalor, heat and flies, and the lack of modern conveniences; they realise that Bangladesh is an ancestral homeland rather than a potential future home.

Visits by nonmigrants to their migrant family members and friends abroad are less researched. Within this sparse subsector of VFR research, we note the following situations. First, the burgeoning field of international retirement and lifestyle migrations, often in locations such as rural France and southern Spain, contains scattered references to the lifestyle retirees being visited by their friends and relatives, typically their children and grandchildren (see, for instance, Benson, 2011; King, Warnes, & Williams, 2000). Generally, such visits are reported to be joyous occasions, but tensions can sometimes arise: the financial and emotional costs of feeding and entertaining everyone and guests who overstay their welcome. Second, within the literature on the intra-European migration of skilled professionals, there is emerging research on visits by close friends and relatives from “back home” Janta and Christou (2019), in their study of professional women who have relocated to Switzerland, look at “hosting as social

practice.” The authors find that women are empowered by their role as hosts and guides when friends and relatives visit and are shown around the city and country. However, some negative aspects are noted: loss of privacy, crowded dwellings, disturbed routines, arrivals at short notice, and the general sense of being an “exploited host.”

A third type of counter-VFR, encapsulated by terms such as “flying grandmothers” and “transnational grannies” (King & Vullnetari, 2006; Plaza, 2000), occurs within the realm of intergenerational gendered care when older women join their married sons and daughters living abroad to “be there” at times of childbirth and to look after young grandchildren (Capistrano & Weaver, 2017). Recent interest in transnational grandparenting reflects the reality of families separated intergenerationally by migration and borders, and the difficulty of “doing grandparenting” at a distance. Visits are one way of partially repairing the spatial rift of separation. At the same time, they enable grandparents to fulfil what they see as their *raison d'être* and make a meaningful contribution to the care and education of their grandchildren. Yet, as Nedelcu and Wyss (2019) point out, being a visiting grandparent requires appropriate resources—money to pay for the trip (or their hosting children may pay) and good health—as well as the permission of the host countries to enter and stay for a certain period of time. As we shall see presently in the Bangladeshi case, visa restrictions on foreign nationals travelling from the Global South can drastically limit the possibilities to visit.

### 3 | THE BRITISH-BANGLADESHI CONTEXT

The present-day Bangladeshi-heritage population in Britain traces its main origins to the *lascars* or seamen who settled in the London docklands in the colonial era. The vast majority of the seamen originated from the region of Sylhet, in north-eastern Bangladesh (which before 1947 was part of British India and then, until 1971, part of Pakistan). Sylhet has a long-established tradition of emigration, driven by rural poverty, political instability, and internal migration links to Calcutta (Kolkata) and Bombay (Mumbai), key port cities where there was a rising demand for seamen by shipping companies. Sylhetis were the leading broker group for *lascar* recruitment, picking people from villages they knew in the region (Alexander, Chatterji, & Jalais, 2016, p. 72).

A second and much larger wave of immigration took place in the decades following the Second World War, when Britain recruited labour from Commonwealth countries to rebuild infrastructure and to work in factories. Bangladeshis (then “East Pakistanis”) were part of a broad swathe of immigrants from Britain’s former colonies in South Asia, the Caribbean, and elsewhere (Van Schendel, 2009, p. 225). The established Sylheti presence ensured that, via chain migration, the majority of this postwar migration was also sourced from this region (Kibria, 2011, p. 80). The size of the Bangladeshi community was further increased by family reunifications during the 1980s and 1990s (Eade, 2013). Although postwar labour migration took Bangladeshis to other British cities, such as Birmingham and industrial towns in the North of England, London remained the major concentration and the

principal point of reference for the evolving diaspora in the United Kingdom. The historic clustering around the Docklands area of Tower Hamlets, including iconic Brick Lane,<sup>3</sup> remains, alongside an eastward drift of the distribution to other areas of working-class East London. According to the most recent British census, in 2011, the Bangladeshi population (self-defined on the basis of ethnicity) numbered more than 450,000, of whom roughly half resided in London. Beyond the initial link with the Docklands and the shipping industry, Bangladeshis in London developed two subsequent occupational specialisations: clothing manufacturing and the restaurant business. Although the East End clothing industry was already in decline in the 1980s (Carey & Shukur, 1985), due to cheaper imports from low-wage economies like (ironically) Bangladesh, the restaurant trade has been in continuous evolution. Many of the original Sylheti seamen had been employed as cooks on British ships, and food-preparation skills were redeployed in the small catering establishments that sprouted in the Docklands to serve the local Bangladeshi and Asian communities. From the 1960s, these cafés and eating houses expanded in size, number, and geographical distribution, and the “Indian” restaurants (mostly owned and staffed by Bangladeshis from Sylhet) “crossed over” to market their food to predominantly “white” clientele. At the same time, the second and subsequent generations, through education and upwardly mobile aspirations, looked not to low-wage labour in factories and restaurants but to better jobs in professionalised sectors of nonmanual employment, including in local and central government offices, schools, universities, and many other institutions (Kibria, 2011, p. 87).

According to Gardner (1993, 1995), the British-Bangladeshi diaspora space is more than just a binary relationship shaped by migrants moving between the two bounded and separated worlds of *desh* (homeland) and *bidesh* (abroad). Rather, *desh* and *bidesh* are different locations of the same society. In terms of two-way VFR mobilities, whereas Bangladesh (specifically rural Sylhet) is remembered and constructed by British-based Bangladeshis through nostalgic memoirs of earlier life stages and places (Miah & King, 2018), *bidesh*, especially London, is seen as an “object of creative embellishment” back in Bangladesh (Gardner, 1995, p. 8), a land of golden opportunities where everything is possible.

In a more recent review, Zeitlyn (2013) points to the diminishing importance of this dualistic concept, especially from the point of view of British Bangladeshis, for whom the discourse of homeland is declining in favour of a geographically widening diaspora and the creation of their own *desh*/homeland in Britain. Nevertheless, the views of the nonmigrants in Sylhet are still of *bidesh* as the source of economic capital and social progress. Our study of nonmigrants’ visits to the *bidesh* of London is partly about the protagonists’ wish to see with their own eyes that this success has been achieved.

### 4 | METHODS

Given the mobile, multilocal nature of VFR, this research was based on interviews and participant observation in both London and

Sylhet and with both visitors and the visited. In London, interviews were carried out with migrant-hosts and their nonmigrant visitors, whereas in Sylhet, the interviewees were nonmigrants who had previously visited their migrant relatives in London.

Our multisited research design reflects the arguments developed by Marcus (1995) in his seminal paper on multisited ethnography, namely, that social phenomena (such as migration and visiting across international borders) have become embedded in a new global system characterised by dynamism, mobility, and interconnectedness. Marcus proclaimed that it was necessary to go beyond a single-sited research design and adopt a multisited approach “to examine the circulation of meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space” (p. 96). Following the “spatial turn” in the social sciences, multisited designs have become increasingly adopted by social researchers (Falzon, 2009), especially those working in migration and mobility studies (King, 2018).

Fieldwork spanned the period from late 2016 to late 2017, starting in London, then moving to Bangladesh to coincide with the spring and Easter holidays, and concluding with a final round of interviews in London. The first-named author carried out the interviews and participant observation, using initially his personal and neighbourhood networks in East London and snowballing from these, as well as initiating new interview chains by attending and participating in local community events. Fieldwork and interviews in Sylhet were facilitated by information and contacts gained during the London fieldwork, followed again by new contacts developed during the fieldwork in Sylhet. In order to establish trust, interviews generally followed a series of informal conversations with the participants.

Generally, the participants were friendly and cooperative, a reaction arguably linked to the first author's positionality as a first-generation male resident of East London. This provided the interviewer with insider-like advantages resulting in the easier recruiting of participants for the research. Many participants, in both London and Sylhet, offered very generous hospitality, with invitations to join family meals and sample extensive arrays of home-cooked food. In Sylhet, the hospitality extended even further, to include accommodation and local transport. However, as Ganga and Scott (2006) have pointed out, an insider position brings its own tensions. Participants were curious about the interviewer and his family's migration background, socio-economic standing, and political allegiance and were thus conscious of possible social divisions between themselves and him.

Fifty-seven research participants were interviewed, 28 in London and 29 in Sylhet. A few participants were interviewed twice, and some interviews were family encounters, including occasions when visits were taking place. Participants varied by age, generation, and gender. Of the 27 nonmigrants,<sup>4</sup> there were 23 males and 4 females, and of 30 migrant participants, 23 were male and 7 were female—ratios that reflect both the community's gender dynamics and the interviewer's gender positionality noted above. Most migrants were first generation (25), and the remainder second and third generation. Most of the interviews were

conducted at the participant's residence, although in London, other mutually agreed venues were used, such as cafés and community centres. The interviews with the first-generation migrant hosts and their visiting relatives were conducted in the Sylheti dialect of Bengali; when conversing with second-generation *Londoni*, English was used, as this was their preferred language. All interviews were transcribed into English for subsequent thematic analysis. Standard ethical procedures for this kind of research were followed: an information sheet was provided, and participants were asked to sign a consent form for the interview and for its recording. There was some initial reluctance to participate, as these forms appeared to the participants as a very “official” thing; reassurances over the confidential and purely “academic” nature of the research were usually sufficient to assuage suspicions. Following standard ethnographic practice, participants are given pseudonyms, and any details that might otherwise compromise them are omitted.

Findings from interviews and other fieldwork conversations were analysed thematically. As the interviews were semistructured, with some preset questions related to the themes that are the principal objects of this research—patterns and experiences of VFR and associated power relations—our analysis logically followed these themes, achieved through repeated readings of the transcripts by both authors and creative discussion of the results. However, the interviews also comprised follow-up, open-ended, and context-specific questions that led to more complex, nuanced, and otherwise “hidden” stories, some of which we also build into our analysis.

## 5 | VISITS TO LONDON: PURPOSES, EXPERIENCES, AND FRUSTRATIONS

Empirical findings in this main section of the paper are designed to respond to the three questions posed in the introduction. What do the visits to London “mean” for both the visitors and the visited? How are the visits planned, performed, and evaluated? What are the underlying conditions of inequality that constrain nonmigrants' ability to visit their *Londoni* relatives?

The core group of interviewees are the migrants' parents, who are visiting, or have visited in the past, their adult children, grandchildren, other relatives, and old friends in London. Kinship frames these visits. For the British-Bangladeshi hosts, bringing relatives from Bangladesh to London is always in the minds of those who can afford to fund or cofund the trip. The “reverse visit” often follows one or more visits to the homeland by the *Londoni*. For visits in both directions, special occasions such as a wedding, childbirth, or a serious illness of a close family member are often the trigger for such trips to take place. At these moments of celebration and crisis, physical copresence has special significance (Campos-Castillo & Hitlin, 2013). In order to illustrate some of these circumstances, here is an extract from a multigeneration family interview in London. The speakers are a visiting older age

parent couple, and their hosting son and his wife, who have just had their second child.

- Ranak (the son): Their visit was long overdue. To have them here on this special occasion was a source of mental strength for us. On top of that, we have the chance to get together again.
- Renu (daughter-in-law): We always had in our mind, whenever we got the chance, we will (have the parents visit us). Besides, my son's birth was also an occasion. Someone new is coming to our family—that is a very happy moment. We thought that if mum and dad could be with us at this joyous moment, it would be great ... our happiness is multiplied ...
- Kiran (the father): We used to wonder how their life was here. We talk on the phone every week, at least once a week. If a week goes by without any contact, we become worried about their health and wellbeing ... Besides, they visited us there sometimes, but we have never done this before (visit them here). We have now experienced it in person, and I am satisfied with my son's arrangement ... what they have managed to achieve so far.
- Kamala (the mother): The main occasion is that my new man (grandson) has come into our family. We thought that if we could be here, it would be helpful to them ... our granddaughter can have our company whilst her mother is in the hospital giving birth. We are very happy to see that our son's family is in good order. This is a big thing ... And above everything else, we have been able to spend time together.

This conversation reveals patterns common across many narrated experiences of visits to London. As well as reinforcing family bonds, such visits are recompense for the enforced sacrifices of migration on both sides and for the visitors to “see with their own eyes” (as they often say) that their migrant children are doing well and achieving their ambitions. We also draw attention to the subtle gender and generational dynamics running through parts of the dialogue. Note that the parents are visiting their son, reflecting the importance of the male lineage in Bangladeshi society. Notice, too, how Kiran expresses his patrilineal satisfaction that his son has managed his life in Britain well so far. And in Kamala's quote, there is the main concern about the event of the birth of “my new man” and the care of her granddaughter, reinforcing the importance of the “circulation of care” in transnational family life (Baldassar & Merla, 2013).

In the succeeding subsections, we break down the phenomenon of the visit into its constituent segments, starting from its anticipation and planning, then touching on accommodation, followed by a wider review of experiences, including gifts, and ending with the vexed and unjust issue of blocked mobility.

## 5.1 | Preparation and mediation

Preparation for the visits is a joint process for the hosts and the visitors. Quite apart from negotiating the logistics of the timing and length of the visit, a key concern is the weather, especially if the visit is to be in winter. In this further extract from the family interview quoted above, Ranak describes some of the preparations and concerns over the visit of his parents.

We started planning six, seven months ago. Because of the immigration requirement, you have to start thinking well ahead. You need to provide six months of bank statements ... these are the requirements set by the Home Office ... Apart from that, we had to work out other things for their arrival. How would they cope with the cold weather? For the first part of their stay, the weather has been OK, not too bad ... My parents are getting older, so their health is our priority. They brought all their regular medications with them, we asked them to do that. Because getting NHS help (for non-residents) is highly complex unless it is an emergency... In Bangladesh as well, there were different preparations, such as who would take care of the house in their absence, it had to be a trusted person. And the type of clothes they would need, the air tickets, and many other things that we had to go through with them.

Another important part of the “infrastructure” of the visits from Bangladesh to the United Kingdom is the involvement of travel agents. Adams (1987) mentioned that some of the pioneering seamen established small travel agencies in the 1960s, both in London and in Sylhet and Dhaka, to facilitate travels to and from Bangladesh. Nowadays, there are several full-blown travel agencies offering a one-stop service that includes not only ticketing but help with the visa process and even language training.<sup>5</sup> In the centre of Sylhet City, there is a cluster of these travel businesses, which were visited as part of this research. Here is an extract from an interview with Jagat, a legal consultant in one of these agencies:

We work like a travel consultancy ... Family visits to England are our most important service ... Even though the immigration rules have been tightened significantly in recent years, these visits still take place, only in smaller numbers than before ... There are two main aspects of the service. First, we need to gather the documents of the applicant in one file. Second, it is very important to get the necessary documents from the host, the son or daughter or whoever: evidence of the relationship, proof of accommodation arrangements, proof of their financial status by payslips, bank statements etc ... So both parties do their job. Our job is to simplify the



difficult process of making the visa application ... Once they get their visa, they are helped by their family in London. They collect them at the airport and take it from there.

Jagat's statement makes clear reference to the increasing visa difficulties nowadays faced by would-be visitors to the United Kingdom—a theme we return to later. He also refers to accommodation arrangements, which we turn to next.

## 5.2 | Accommodation

Two main reasons explain why visitors from Bangladesh do not stay in commercial accommodation. First, the culture of hospitality prevents this from happening; furthermore, hosts are anxious to demonstrate the success of their project of “home-making” in London. As Shani (2013) points out, VFR blurs the boundaries between “home” and “away” because it involves home-like practices. Second, the vast majority of the visitors would not be able to afford UK hotel prices. Even when the visitors travel to a different town during their stay in the United Kingdom, they often match this with a relative or friend who lives there or close by. The strength of the hospitality obligation amongst Bangladeshis (which also applies when *Londoni* Bangladeshis visit their relatives in the homeland) was summed up by Selim, who was staying in London:

There is no way you can stay in a hotel ... during my visit there has been a competition amongst my relatives to host me at their house.

The culture of unquestioned hospitality is held most strongly by the first-generation migrants in London and their older family members in Bangladesh. The second-generation children of the migrants, and even more so the third generation, tend to feel less “committed,” not least because they may never have seen their much older visitors before and do not share such intimate connections with them. Indeed, the younger generation *Londoni* occasionally reveal a tinge of resentment at their “culturally different” older relatives invading their space in crowded accommodation. Although our interviews with first-generation migrant hosts did not record any explicit articulations of unhappiness, the strain on household resources and space was sometimes hinted at. Half allusions were made to the interruption of daily routines, the need for working hosts to put in place a kind of shift system to host and guide visitors, and the pressures on the younger generations to conform to Bangladeshi codes of hospitality and respect towards visiting elders.

Thus, although the prevailing moral and cultural obligation requires British-Bangladeshi hosts to accommodate, feed, entertain, and “tour-guide” their guests throughout their stay, this duty is not without intrafamilial tensions and financial stress (cf. Janta & Christou, 2019). This is noted by the visitor-participants who have travelled more than once, who explained that the hospitality they

received on their initial visit was warmer and more thorough than on subsequent trips.

## 5.3 | Gifts back and forth

Exchanging gifts is a reciprocal process among Bangladeshis during visiting and hosting, for VFR trips in both directions. Following the classic studies by Mauss (1990) and Gregory (2015), gifting is regarded as an obligated “social practice” and a “moral economy” based on generosity, reciprocity, and respect. It is simply inconceivable to arrive empty-handed. Moreover, visitors also receive gifts from the hosts. Whereas British Bangladeshis visiting their homeland tend to take cosmetics, brand clothing, and electronic goods, nonmigrants travelling the other way bring mostly Bangladeshi items such as handicrafts, traditional dresses, and food products that are unavailable or expensive to buy in Britain. These gift exchanges also reflect the socio-economic inequality and inherent power imbalances within and beyond the transnational family. British Bangladeshis take suitcases full of expensive gifts when visiting their homeland relatives: this is both a gesture of generosity and affection and a symbolic index of their material success as migrants in Britain (Miah & King, 2018). Gifts borne by the visitors to Britain have a different kind of symbolism: they are not expensive but are products of the Sylheti homeland and soil, including tropical fruits and vegetables, home-made sweets and chutneys, spices, and dried fish. They represent the nostalgic smells, flavours, and freshness of the homeland. Debu, a visitor to London, but interviewed back in Sylhet, described his experiences of gifting:

We mostly bring them food items from Bangladesh. There are some favourite local items, like Satkora (a kind of lime), Naga Morich (a hot and intensely flavoured chilli) and dried fish. They like to have these things. Personally, the best gift is to be able to see each other after a long time ... Nevertheless, I do get a lot of gifts too ... mainly clothes ... good quality and well-designed ... Clothes are not so good in Bangladesh.

One notable difference within the two-ended practices of exchanging gifts is that visiting Bangladeshis receive significant sums of cash as gifts from their *Londoni* hosts. Most of this money is then spent on shopping in London. On this topic, Sriti relayed the following details when asked what she brought back from London:

Well, ask me what I did not bring back (laughing). I brought so many things, bags, dresses, ornaments, cosmetics ... I spent every penny ... I like shopping too much!

As well as being enjoyable in themselves, these gifts brought back from visits to London are an indication of the success of the *Londoni* and can be publicly displayed upon return so that other relatives and

friends in the home community can be assured of the migrants' material well-being.

## 5.4 | Visitor experiences

In this subsection, we highlight various aspects of the visitors' experience which are resonant in the narratives and which therefore stand out as holding particular meaning for the protagonists. Central in all cases is the very *raison d'être* of the visits: to spend quality time socialising and reconnecting with relatives and friends. Other significant elements are place-specific experiences, such as iconic London landmarks and visits to other towns and cities. Being taken to famous tourist locations by their hosts is a major part of the visiting experience for Bangladeshis from the homeland, who are often equally mesmerised by the more mundane aspects of the city's life, as well as obvious cultural differences. Some of these aspects are picked up by retired schoolteachers Kiran and Kamala, whose ongoing visit to their son Ranak and daughter-in-law Renu was featured earlier.

- Kiran: Well, we have visited the special places such as the bridge (Tower Bridge) which was lifted whilst we were there, the palace (Tower of London), the River Thames and we walked through the tunnel under the river ... the queen's house (Buckingham Palace), Parliament, and many parks ... We will visit the British Museum too, if the weather is in our favour ... What's more, I was given a special reception in a restaurant in the Docklands. It was published in the local newspaper ...
- Ranak: And you saw it on Facebook ... My mum and dad got a reception by their former students, about 200 of them; they received a lot of gifts.
- Kiran: When I was sitting there amongst them, I felt like I am at home. I forgot for that moment I am in London ... I never thought that former students would remember me in that way.

As the final element in this family-interview exchange shows, visits are also about rebuilding and recreating the social capital inherent in social, kinship, and professional networks that are, at least momentarily, restored through copresence (Campos-Castillo & Hitlin, 2013).

As well as older generation parents visiting their migrant children and old friends, some visitors were younger and generally visited their siblings and cousins. Below, Gony describes his recent visit with his wife and children. As well as name checking the usual sights and special experiences, he made some revealing observations about contrasting behaviour and gender relations between the two countries.

The most interesting place for me was Brick Lane. It does not seem like London! You see lots of

Bangladeshis there; all around you people are speaking Bengali. ... I visited a lot of places in London, plus Birmingham and Manchester. For my nephew's wedding, I went to Newcastle. I also went to see relatives in Leicester. I liked the London Eye very much; you can see the whole city from above, amazing.

[...]

We enjoyed a special day, New Year's Eve. My wife and kids were mesmerised by that day. We went to the bank of the River Thames ... the fireworks were spectacular, we never saw anything like that in our entire life. It was so huge and went on for so long, we will never forget that. My kids were literally jumping for joy in the crowd. Before we went to the fireworks, we spent the day going around the city, eating out. It was a really special day.

[...]

I also liked the fact that everyone is busy with themselves. For example, one couple is standing over there chatting to each other. Other people are just walking past them, doing their own thing and not bothering about what others are doing. That's nice. In our country, if someone stands on the street talking to another person, especially if it's between a girl and a boy or a man and a woman, people will stop and look at them in a weird way ... In London, everyone is free to do as they wish without others staring at them ... That's impressive.

Many other interviewees drew similar contrasts between *desh* and *bidesh* as a result of their experiences on visits to London. On the one hand, they were struck by the many "home from home" features like Brick Lane and other spaces in Tower Hamlets, the numerous curry houses, Bengali grocers, and shops. On the other hand, they point to obvious differences in behaviour: people "minding their own business" in London and (a common observation) the better behaviour of drivers. As Lipu said:

In Bangladesh, drivers are pressing the horn incessantly, they do not follow any rules, no lanes, no signals, no seatbelts... there are huge differences.

Finally, in this subsection, we draw attention to a few mild complaints. Just as the hosts sometimes got a bit stressed with the responsibility of "managing" their visitors and were perhaps over-anxious to give them the full "visitor experience", so a few of our visitor participants voiced a desire to be more "free" to enjoy London on their own terms.

Habib had visited London twice since his retirement. He found his first visit, which lasted 2 months, stressful and exhausting because of the pressure to be constantly ferried around to visit so many friends and relatives. During the second visit, which was for



4 months, he took more time and travelled around independently. Here is how he drew the contrast between the two visits:

(On the first visit) my brother said to me on the first day in London, there are so many invitations and people to meet. You cannot do it without making a list. I needed to visit at least eight houses a day, he told me, if I wanted to accept all the invitations. I managed to go to 60 houses in the end, travelling in my relatives' cars from place to place. It was impossible to have a meal in every house I visited; in many cases, I just had a tea. In between visiting all these people in London, I also visited friends and relatives in Brighton, Coventry and Birmingham. So, to do all this, was very hard.

[...]

The second time, I chose to use public transport and went anywhere I wanted. I wanted to go around independently, to learn and experience things myself. I was there for four months. Using the Underground was a good experience. I learned the difference in service with Bangladesh-like day and night. Trains and buses come every few minutes. The arrival times are displayed and updated on the electronic board, so nothing to worry about ... I bought a day travel card and spent all day wandering around, eating out, sight-seeing, and returned to my brother's house before midnight ... It was really the best way to experience London. If you are always in a car with your relative, you cannot enjoy the real London experience.

Hence, meeting the (changing) expectation of guests is not always easy for the hosts who—when suffering from the tension of “Are we doing it right?”—tend to deprive the visitors of agency and overload them with commitments and what Lulle (2014, p. 166) has termed “emotional congestion.” Yet the visitors, for their part, are hostage to the historical nature of emigration from Sylhet: they come from clusters of villages where networks of relatives are both extensive and tight. Being in London and not visiting a relative or old friend would be considered an insult—hence Habib's obligation to visit 60 people and consume refreshment in every place. Moreover, there is an element of finality about some of the visits. Especially for older visitors, this may be the last opportunity to visit their extensive network of *Londoni* kin and friends before their death and to pay, and receive, a final face-to-face tribute (cf. Asiedu, 2005). Hence, the carefully choreographed performativity (Fortier, 2000) of the visits leaves the visitors little room for manoeuvre, except perhaps on subsequent visits, as Habib's story illustrates.

## 5.5 | Blocked visits and “involuntary immobilities”

Although British Bangladeshis, like many migrant and diasporic groups, are relatively free to travel to the country of origin, finance

permitting, “reverse VFR” is less easy. Cresswell (2006, 2010), among others, has pointed out that mobilities do not flow evenly in an apparently frictionless world of global travel. There is an unequal politics of mobility that separates those who can freely move, who have “kinetic energy,” from those who cannot, the “kinetic underclass.” Citizenship, access to travel visas, and borders and bordering policies are at the heart of this inequality in “mobility capital.” Much of this differentiation in access to international mobility derives from the extraterritorial exercise of state power (Collyer & King, 2015). Many Bangladeshis want, often desperately, to visit their migrant relatives in Britain. Yet, even those who have abundant financial resources, a supporting network of friends and relatives as guarantors, and a completely valid reason for visiting, are nowadays routinely denied an entry visa by the increasingly repressive British immigration regime. This is an instance of what Carling (2002) has termed “involuntary immobility,” an opposite condition to the “global kinetic elite” (Cresswell, 2006). The plight of blocked mobility is emotionally illustrated by Banu, an elderly widow in Sylhet:

My daughter is in London, she's been living there for 16 years. She has a daughter, and they both visited me many years ago. She has not been able to visit me ever since she gave birth to a son, my grandson, because he is disabled. She cannot travel long distances with the boy. So, she wanted me to visit her in London instead; but I was refused, because they are not earning enough money to officially prove that they can host me. I am a widow ... I do not have a salary or bank statements. ... This was one of the saddest moments of my life (crying).

British Bangladeshis get equally upset when their relatives are denied a visa. Maya wanted her father to come over for her brother's wedding. He too was denied a visa. Her account reveals a mixture of grief and sense of injustice:

When my brother got married here, I wanted my father to be involved. We applied for the visa and he got refused because they thought he would not go back. That's ridiculous—my father had his whole life over there—if he came here he would be a fish out of water. We feel helpless ... Getting somebody married off is a big thing in my culture. I organised almost everything, with the help of my brother, but we needed someone to guide us ... That's a big, big gap. All three of us siblings feel it to this day ... It was sort of disrespectful to the bride's party that we did not have the groom's father as the guardian; they had to deal with us, ‘kids’. Whereas the in-laws, they had everybody there ... It was very disappointing; an important family occasion, and he got refused. My dad even had his suits tailor-made to wear at his son's wedding ... He could not come, he was heartbroken.

A third example of involuntary immobility is an equally emotional case. Anowar is a recently retired businessman in Sylhet whose in-laws live in London with other members of the family. He has visited twice before, but was refused a third time, even though the reason was extremely pressing—the imminent death of his mother-in-law. This interview quote is long because we want to let Anowar give full rein to his logical argument and above all to his feelings of hurt and anger.

I visited London in 2006 and 2008. I applied to visit again, with my wife, last year (2016). They did not approve the visa applications. This is wrong ... They preach to us about human rights violation in Bangladesh. I think this (visa refusal) is against human rights: if you do not let us visit our relatives, you deny us our fundamental human rights. I was very upset. ... My mother-in-law was on her death-bed, she was about to die, the doctors in London provided a letter explaining this. And yet we were denied the right to go and see her for the last time. This is really a mean, inhumane and highly condemnable act by the British High Commission ... We then applied only for my wife's visit visa. Her brother sent his bank statements from London showing that he had £72,000 to support her stay ... Yet, again, they did not allow her to go ... Now, you tell me, is that humane? Where is her human right to visit her dying mother?

[...]

There is a common thing they say on every refusal. It reads: 'I am not satisfied ...' It's an insulting sentence! It means to me, we do not give a damn about you! ... If someone has a serious reason to visit, like we had, you must consider it seriously. The doctors in your own country would not fake it (the medical evidence)! In my opinion, this denial of a visa is a criminal offence. A woman's mother is dying, the doctor has confirmed it in writing, yet you do not allow her in. That's a crime ... They have ruled us for two centuries. They should understand our society and culture. British Bangladeshis are not a bunch of thieves. They are not begging on the street. They are working hard, doing business and contributing to Britain's economic growth. They and their relatives deserve to be treated with some respect.

Anowar's frustration is palpable and was shared by many other visitors who, having visited in the past, can now no longer do so because of seemingly random denials of straightforward cases that meet the formal requirements. The increasing barriers to visiting over the last few years reflect the creation of a "hostile environment" policy towards non-EU migrants introduced by Theresa May in 2012 when she was the British Home Secretary. It is a form of extreme immigration control that disproportionality targets "suspect

populations" (Bowling & Westenra, 2018), both domestically and transnationally through different institutions. Domestically, it is designed to force irregular migrants to return home, dramatically illustrated by the placarded vans that toured cities in Britain telling those in the country "illegally" to "go home or face arrest" (Goodfellow, 2019, p. 6). Transnationally, it aims to prevent people from travelling and entering the United Kingdom for fear that they will not return. It gives immigration officials in Bangladesh immense power that can be stretched and abused. The accounts that we have presented of Bangladeshi visitors, their *Londoni* relatives, and the travel-agency mediators in Bangladesh demonstrate how the hostile environment affects individuals, families, and communities transnationally, often with tragic and emotionally draining consequences.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

From the evidence collected during 1 year of field interviewing and participant observation in London and Sylhet and presented in the form of representative narrative extracts, we have answered our three research questions. First, visits to London, alongside visits to the homeland, are extremely meaningful for the maintenance of transnational familyhood, whether these are routine visits or, like most of them, timed to coincide with important family and community events. They are performative acts of kinship, care-giving and receiving, and identity and belonging (cf. Baldassar & Merla, 2013; Fortier, 2000, pp. 3–6). Second, such visits, of necessity, need to be planned well in advance and have their own unwritten rules of hospitality, almost rituality. They have, contained within them, a series of guided and choreographed microvisits to other relatives and to tourist sites in and around London. Third, it is abundantly clear that the terrain of Bangladeshi visits is not a level playing field. For British-resident Bangladeshis wanting to visit their homeland, the field slopes in their favour, especially if they are British passport holders, as most of them are. For "reverse visitors," it is an uphill struggle with many players involved, including opponents, with the "goal" of getting a visa increasingly tightly guarded by the British High Commission and the unjust regulations of the hostile environment against visitors from poor countries (Goodfellow, 2019). This uneven expression of states' discriminatory power over international mobility emerges as one of our most powerful findings. The British-Bangladeshi social field lies across a transnational terrain, which sustains starkly unequal power relationships in terms of both access to economic capital and, particularly in relation to the ability to make visits, of the strength of the British state to control who can visit and who cannot (Zeitlyn, 2015, p. 163). Selim, a Sylhet-resident nonmigrant with many relatives in London, gave a powerful justification for freeing up the mechanism of VFR. In his view, geographical distance should not be a barrier to maintaining intimate relations of kinship and friendship, especially in today's world of fast global travel:

We need each other's presence, help and guidance in our society. You cannot have a wedding ceremony,

birthdays, a funeral, death anniversary or Eid without your close relatives and friends being present. Or, in bad moments like an accident or financial crisis, you need the help, comfort and presence of your relatives. That's what relatives are for.

It is clear from Selim's quote and from other narratives presented that the visits are deeply meaningful for sustaining the family-centred Bangladeshi way of life. Many of the reasons for nonmigrant Bangladeshis to visit London are the same as those listed for homeland-oriented VFR, namely, the need for physical and emotional contact, to be there to offer care at crucial moments such as childbirth and end of life, to celebrate weddings, and to be able to observe "with one's own eyes" the success of migrant relatives in London.

Participants often waxed lyrical about the sights of London, the "home away from home" nature of those parts of East London which have been densely settled by Bangladeshis, most notably the diasporic ethnic space of Brick Lane, and many aspects of the British "way of life"—the efficiency, safety, and security and the relatively egalitarian social setting. Some disjunctures were detectable, not so much from "on the record" interviews but more from "off the record" remarks and hints: these included the challenge to combine being a dutiful and hospitable host with ongoing work and family commitments, a lower level of kinship solidarity on the part of the British-born younger generations and, in a few cases, a growing sense of the lack of opportunity to "do their own thing" on the part of the visitors.

The phenomenon of VFR is incomplete without considering these reverse transnational visits and the complex and diverse experiences and interactions they reveal in maintaining a transnational sense of belonging across the increasingly blurred *desh-bidesh* divide. However, these counter-VFR mobilities are practised in a highly unequal context, whereby differences in wealth between migrants and nonmigrants are exacerbated by unequal rights to travel abroad. The increasingly inhumane stance of the UK authorities towards such visits from homeland relatives and the failure of the authorities to recognise both the cultural significance of family solidarity and the emotional needs of people to travel at times of crucial life-stage events threaten the harmony of the British-Bangladeshi family and community and indeed violate basic human rights principles.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> There is a parallel here with the literature on remittances, generally assumed to flow "one-way" from the migrants to their countries of origin. In reality, "reverse remittances" are often very important in the transnational migrant experience (Mazzucato, 2011), helping migrants through difficult times by providing both financial assistance and support in the form of childcare.

<sup>2</sup> There is also a third spatial trajectory that, as far as we are aware, has never been analysed in the migration-VFR literature. This is the situation where migrants or diasporas living in one country visit their

conationals or coethnics living in another host country. Common sense indicates that such "lateral" visits across a diaspora must take place, especially when a source country has spawned emigrant communities in many destination countries (an obvious example, the Turkish migrant presence in several European countries), but this has so far been overlooked. We flag this as an area for future research, which could be especially rewarding for the multiple cultural dynamics involved.

<sup>3</sup> The iconicity of Brick Lane derives not only from its role as the historically and geographically positioned cultural heartland of Bangladeshi life in London but also from the way this symbolic and emotional space was (mis)represented in Ali's (2003) eponymous book and the subsequent film, which in turn generated vehement protests against what were perceived as stereotypes of poverty, drug abuse, traditionalism, and exoticism (Alexander, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> The term "nonmigrant" is used here to refer to someone who has not migrated to the United Kingdom; it does not exclude the possibility of migration elsewhere.

<sup>5</sup> After the imposition of restrictive immigration acts in the 1960s and 1970s, the main way for the British-Bangladeshi community to grow was by family reunion and marriage migration. An English-language test was required for a spouse visa to be issued, as a result of an exaggerated concern that too many Bangladeshi young women were being recruited as spouses for first- and especially second-generation male Bangladeshis in Britain. For two articles that shed a critical light on the harsh politics and stereotypes surrounding Bangladeshi marriage migration, see Alexander (2013) and Gardner (2006).

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